

Songs of the Silenced: Folk expression of women's protest in the Garhwal Himalayas

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Abstract

This paper explores the folk songs of women in the Garhwal Himalayas as vital yet often overlooked forms of protest. It examines how women in the Garhwal Himalayas use folk-songs genres- laments, work-songs, ritual songs (including jagar) and migration and protest songs- as embodied and oral forms of protest against social, economic and ecological marginalization. By transforming private pain into collective expression these songs act as counter narratives that challenge silence and create spaces of solidarity, remembrance, and subtle resistance. Beyond their aesthetic and cultural significance, these songs illuminate the gendered dimensions of life in the Himalayas, foregrounding issues such as patriarchal restrictions, loss due to migration, environmental degradation, and the invisibility of women's labor. By situating these songs within feminist theories of voice, subversion, and cultural production, the paper highlights how women's oral traditions in Garhwal articulate protest in ways that both preserve collective memory and contest dominant structures of power.

I. INTRODUCTION

Folk traditions have long been the cultural lifeline of Himalayan communities, preserving collective memories, struggles, and emotions through oral expression. While written records often highlight the perspectives of social elites, oral traditions reflect the experiences of ordinary people and act as alternative repositories of history. In farming and mountain-based societies, where women's voices are largely missing from official documentation, folk songs hold particular importance. They give voice to daily work, happiness, sorrow, and discontent, turning individual feelings into shared cultural narratives. Passed down through generations, these oral forms not only safeguard cultural heritage but also carry within them subtle

critiques of social injustice, environmental exploitation, and patriarchal dominance (Smith 22).

In Uttarakhand's Garhwal region, folk songs are deeply woven into everyday social and cultural life. This Himalayan landscape has long been shaped by patterns of migration, fragile ecological conditions, and entrenched patriarchal norms. Women, in particular, have shouldered these challenges, working as farmers, caregivers, and ritual specialists while navigating the limits imposed on their freedom and speech. Within such circumstances, women's songs—whether sung as wedding laments, field work chants, ritual jagar invocations, or migration ballads mourning absent loved ones—become more than just

emotional outpourings. They act as subtle forms of resistance, enabling women to voice discontent that cannot always be spoken aloud, transforming silence into expression and lived experience into collective memory (Negi 45).

Women use songs to voice their reluctance to leave their homes and familiar surroundings, citing reasons such as dissatisfaction with an older or unsympathetic husband, conflicts with in-laws, or the burden of excessive labor. In these regions, significant male migration leaves men away from their villages for extended periods, working in cities. During their absence, women rely on their own resilience to manage household responsibilities, raise families, and navigate life independently. Through their songs, women articulate their struggles and find an outlet for their sorrows. These songs reflect the rhythms of life—seasonal changes, daily tasks, and life events—encapsulating every phase of a woman's life and her multiple roles at home and in society. Even love songs, which celebrate a woman's beauty and skills, often emphasize traits that would make her "valuable" in her marital home, revealing an underlying narrative of patriarchy.

Folk art is an essential aspect of daily life, serving both functional and spontaneous purposes. It embodies a sense of belonging and connection within a cultural framework. While cultural change introduces innovation, the core remains steadfast, and the process of transformation is ongoing. Change is inherent to all cultures, but its pace and direction differ widely. The extents to which a culture fosters and accepts flexibility, along with its specific needs at a given time, significantly shape the course of such changes. Even when changes are perceived as beneficial, individuals may struggle to embrace them due to adherence to established norms and beliefs. Therefore, achieving social transformation requires a shift in individual values and belief systems, enabling greater adaptability and responsiveness to organic growth and development. (Capila 45)

A feminist lens allows these songs to be understood as subtle forms of resistance. Thinkers like *James C. Scott* suggest that marginalized groups often convey discontent through what he terms "*hidden transcripts*"—indirect, coded, and everyday acts that challenge

authority without confronting it openly (Scott 14). Similarly, Judith Butler highlights that subversion does not always rely on overt rebellion but can emerge through repetition, irony, or the reinterpretation of cultural norms (Butler 122). The folk songs of Garhwal reflect these strategies of resistance. Through laments that channel personal pain, compositions that raise ecological concerns such as opposition to deforestation, or humorous critiques of patriarchal control in marriage songs, Garhwali women expand the space of what can be expressed as political. Their defiance may not always appear direct, yet it resonates powerfully through shared performance and collective voice.

The ecological aspect of these songs is equally significant. The fragile Himalayan landscape has long faced deforestation, soil erosion, and recurring natural disasters, all of which directly shape women's everyday realities. Folk songs that mourn the destruction of forests underscore women's close connection with nature while also critiquing the state and commercial interests driving environmental decline. During movements like the Chipko Andolan of the 1970s, women's musical expressions became vital tools of ecological resistance, linking environmental concerns to larger struggles for survival. These protest songs reveal how folk traditions function as political voices in contexts where women are largely excluded from formal platforms of decision-making (Shiva 38).

Migration is a persistent theme in the folk songs of Garhwali women. For many years, the region's economic conditions have forced men to leave for the plains or cities in search of work, leaving women to shoulder the responsibilities of farming and household management in the hills. This situation creates a double burden: alongside the emotional pain of separation and loneliness, women take on heavier physical and social duties. Their songs give voice to these experiences, lamenting the absence of husbands and brothers, questioning the justice of economic systems that fracture families, and seeking acknowledgment of their sacrifices. In doing so, migration songs become both expressions of sorrow and acts of resistance, representing what scholars describe as "songs of survival," through

which women collectively process their hardships and preserve resilience (Rawat 77).

By foregrounding Garhwali women's folk songs as cultural texts, this study argues that they serve not only as aesthetic expressions of emotion but also as political acts of resistance. These songs operate as living archives, preserving oral histories and women's perspectives that are often excluded from official records. In their verses, one can trace the rhythms of agrarian labor, the grief of separation through migration, the intimate negotiations of marital life, and the ecological anxieties of communities bound to the fragile Himalayan environment.

Through a feminist lens, this paper explores how these songs reflect key contradictions—obedience and resistance, fragility and resilience, silence and voice—through which women negotiate patriarchal power and social norms. Drawing on James C. Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts," Judith Butler's theory of subversive repetition, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's insights on the subaltern, bell hooks' critiques of systemic patriarchy and marginalization, and Kumkum Sangari's analyses of gendered cultural constructs, the study positions Garhwali women's folk traditions as nuanced yet powerful interventions in debates around power, voice, and resistance. These theorists collectively illuminate how women's songs—though often informal, coded, and performative—embody both critique and creativity, offering spaces for subversion, agency, and social commentary that challenge dominant narratives and assert the legitimacy of women's lived experiences.

This study explores major genres of women's folk traditions in Garhwal: laments voicing grief over loss and injustice; work songs that intertwine labor with social commentary; ritual performances like *jagar* that call upon divine power; migration songs expressing the sorrow of divided families; and ecological songs that link women's existence to the wellbeing of nature. Considered together, these varied forms demonstrate how women embed protest within the fabric of daily life, while simultaneously connecting their voices to broader struggles for survival, identity, and justice in the Himalayan context.

Challenges Faced by Women in Uttarakhand

- **Gender Inequalities**
Despite their vital contributions to society, women in Uttarakhand continue to encounter substantial gender inequalities. Although the sex ratio is gradually improving, it still highlights a societal preference for male children. Additionally, women face barriers in accessing education and healthcare services.
- **Limited Economic Opportunities:** The limited industrial development in the hilly regions restricts employment options for women. A majority are involved in agriculture, often receiving little to no compensation for their efforts. With male laborers migrating for work, women are left to bear the dual responsibilities of managing domestic chores and farming.
- **Impact of Climate Change:** Climate change has had a particularly severe impact on women in Uttarakhand. As the main gatherers of water, firewood, and fodder, they now face the burden of traveling longer distances due to dwindling resources, significantly increasing their workload.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Perspectives on Voice, Resistance, and Social Change

Analyzing folk songs that express dissent, resistance, and social transformation in the lives of Garhwali women becomes more meaningful when approached through feminist perspectives. Within patriarchal systems, women's voices are frequently pushed to the periphery, their experiences dismissed as secondary to dominant male narratives. Yet, feminist thinkers like bell hooks, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Kumkum Sangari provide important frameworks to understand how women's oral traditions—particularly folk songs—serve as spaces of resistance, negotiation, and reimagining of identity.

In her seminal work *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), bell hooks describe "talking back" as more than ordinary speech—it is a deliberate act of reclaiming

authority and confronting the forces that attempt to silence marginalized voices. Speaking becomes a radical gesture when it challenges the expectation of women's silence, particularly among oppressed groups.

In Garhwal, women's folk songs exemplify this idea vividly. Performed during farming tasks, weddings, or religious rituals, these songs carry subtle but powerful critiques of patriarchy. They are not limited to expressing personal sorrow or longing but often encode social resistance within cultural traditions. Verses that question dowry practices, mock the arrogance of in-laws, or lament the hardships of migration highlight this defiance. By transforming individual emotions into collective voices, Garhwali women turn an everyday act of singing into an instrument of solidarity and social commentary. In doing so, their music reflects hooks' insight that reclaiming one's voice is inseparable from reclaiming an authentic way of life. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), bell hooks define "talking back" as more than casual speech—it is an act of reclaiming power and challenging systems that silence marginalized people. For hooks, moving "from silence into speech" is a radical act for the oppressed, one that resists domination while creating space for healing and growth (hooks 9). Speaking becomes revolutionary when women, especially those from marginalized groups, refuse to remain silent and submissive.

In Garhwal, women's folk songs capture this spirit. Sung in fields, at weddings, or during rituals, these songs often go beyond expressing sorrow to voice quiet resistance. Verses criticizing dowry, mocking in-laws, or grieving migration transform personal pain into a shared strength. Through this everyday act of singing, Garhwali women assert their voices, turning music into a tool of resilience and empowerment.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), questions whether marginalized groups—especially women—can genuinely express themselves within systems dominated by power. She argues that subaltern voices are often silenced, reshaped, or filtered through dominant structures, making authentic representation

difficult (Spivak 102–104). In contrast, Garhwali women's folk songs provide a space where subaltern expression is both clear and independent. Composed and performed by women, these oral traditions center on their lived experiences and remain largely free from male mediation or written codification. Through laments of widows, songs of young brides, and other expressions of everyday hardship, these songs preserve truths often excluded from official histories. Functioning as counter-archives, they store collective memory, articulate protest, and demonstrate that the subaltern can indeed speak within oral and community-based traditions.

In the Garhwal context, women can be understood as subaltern subjects, though with specific nuances.

- **Social exclusion:** Within traditional rural communities, women were often denied decision-making roles, control over property, and participation in ritual authority.
- **Economic burden:** Migration of men to urban centres left women with the dual responsibility of managing agricultural labor and domestic duties, yet their efforts were rarely acknowledged.
- **Cultural invisibility:** Women's experiences were largely absent from official histories or literary records, leaving folk songs—oral, collective, and often anonymous—as one of the few channels where their voices could be heard.

Through these conditions, Garhwali women fit into Spivak's notion of the subaltern: their histories were silenced in dominant discourse, yet their folk songs provided a platform to give expression to suffering, critique social practices, and assert identity.

Subversion: Subversion refers to the subtle undermining of dominant power structures rather than their outright overthrow. Within feminist and cultural theory, it describes how marginalized individuals challenge established hierarchies and disrupt the authority of patriarchy and colonialism.

In this sense, Garhwali women's folk songs function as acts of subversion in multiple ways:

- Confronting patriarchy: They ridicule oppressive in-laws, criticize exploitative dowry practices, and highlight the pain caused by migration, thereby questioning patriarchal authority.
- Asserting agency: By voicing grief, anger, and longing, women position themselves as subjects with the right to speak, rejecting silence.
- Building counter-narratives: While official histories focus on rulers, wars, and reformers, these songs safeguard the lived realities of women, creating an alternative archive of memory and protest.
- Fostering collective strength: As oral and communal practices, these songs transform personal suffering into shared resistance, breaking down the isolation reinforced by patriarchal norms.

Thus, Garhwali women's folk songs may not overthrow dominant structures directly, but they subvert them by questioning inequalities, carving out autonomous cultural spaces, and reaffirming women's perspectives within a collective tradition.

Kumkum Sangari, in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (1989), examines how Indian patriarchy relies on religious imagery and cultural archetypes, such as Sita, Savitri, and Parvati, to uphold ideals of chastity, obedience, and self-sacrifice as defining qualities of the "ideal woman" (Sangari and Vaid 9). At the same time, she highlights how women's cultural practices, particularly folk traditions, often resist and reinterpret these norms, offering alternative visions of female identity.

In Garhwali protest songs, this resistance is evident. Women singers critique neglectful husbands, mock domineering mothers-in-law, or express longing for their natal homes, challenging the passive, compliant ideal. Through these songs, women articulate autonomy, emotional truth, and agency, envisioning a model of womanhood that values dignity, resilience, and inner well-being alongside social roles.

Scott's concept of "*hidden transcripts*" (1990) refers to the ways subordinate groups critique

power and authority indirectly, often through private or culturally coded practices rather than overt confrontation. Hidden transcripts exist alongside the public "official transcript," which is shaped by the dominant power structure and portrays obedience and conformity. In the context of Garhwali women, folk songs function as hidden transcripts by embedding critiques of patriarchy, social injustice, and ecological exploitation within culturally sanctioned performances. For example, a field song may lament the heavy labor imposed on women, subtly criticize a domineering mother-in-law, or express resentment toward dowry practices. While such critiques are often coded or metaphorical, they communicate dissent within a social framework that otherwise limits direct confrontation. The songs thereby serve as safe yet powerful tools to question authority, assert autonomy, and document resistance across generations.

Butler's theory of subversive repetition (1990) explains how *repeated acts and performances*—even within normative frameworks—can disrupt and destabilize dominant power structures. Gender, in Butler's view, is performative: norms are maintained through repeated behaviors, but these repetitions also create possibilities for subversion when they are altered, parodied, or infused with new meaning. Garhwali women's folk songs exemplify this principle: by repeatedly singing about hardships, injustices, and personal grief during daily labor, festivals, or rituals, women perform acts that reinforce social cohesion while simultaneously questioning patriarchal authority. The repetition of these songs embeds critique in everyday life, making resistance habitual, culturally intelligible, and subtly transformative. Over time, these performances cultivate collective awareness, strengthen community solidarity, and challenge the seeming inevitability of gendered norms.

Together, these feminist perspectives show that Garhwali women's folk songs are not merely aesthetic expressions but acts of resistance, negotiation, and social intervention, transforming silence into voice, personal pain into collective memory, and everyday performance into a site of empowerment

Towards Social Change

The protest embedded in Garhwali women's folk songs is rarely overt or confrontational in the conventional sense; rather, it is incremental and deeply rooted in everyday life. These songs subtly challenge social hierarchies and patriarchal norms by creating spaces where women can express dissatisfaction, critique injustice, and assert their agency without fear of direct reprisal. For instance, a wedding song that humorously mocks the groom's family or highlights the hardships faced by a bride does not immediately dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures, but it normalizes the idea that women's voices and perspectives are valid and worthy of attention. Through repeated performance, these acts of cultural expression gradually shape communal consciousness, allowing critique, irony, and reflection to circulate in ways that quietly contest male authority.

Moreover, these songs demonstrate the transformative power of oral traditions. By blending aesthetic beauty, humor, lament, and everyday labor, they turn ordinary life experiences into collective narratives of resilience, agency, and subtle resistance. They reveal how the personal—grief over migration, frustration with household labor, or longing for freedom—intersects with the political, creating a lived record of social critique and cultural negotiation.

Framed through feminist theoretical lenses, including hooks' concept of "talking back," Spivak's reflections on the subaltern, Scott's notion of hidden transcripts, Butler's theory of subversive repetition, and Sangari's insights on reimagining womanhood, these songs emerge as active participants in social transformation. They are not merely artistic or emotional expressions but living archives of resistance, documenting struggles and aspirations while subtly fostering social change. In the remote Himalayan landscapes, where formal political engagement for women has historically been limited, these songs embody the power of voice, communal solidarity, and cultural memory, showing that even small, repeated acts of expression can contribute to broader shifts in gender norms and social values.

By situating the analysis of Garhwali women's songs within this framework, the following section demonstrates how each song enacts these dynamics in practice, translating cultural expression into a tangible lens for understanding women's agency, resistance, and contribution to social change.

Analysis of songs expressing dissent, protest, and social change concerning women's lives

- Alcoholism as a Social Issue - During the 1990s, women in Uttarakhand spearheaded anti-alcohol protests, particularly in rural areas, to address the destructive impact of alcoholism on families and communities. These movements played a crucial role in compelling local authorities to implement liquor bans in specific regions.
- The Chipko Movement: A Testament to Bravery- Women in Uttarakhand are celebrated for their remarkable resilience and unwavering dedication, qualities shaped by their Himalayan heritage. Despite the hardships posed by the challenging mountain terrain, they have played pivotal roles in social and environmental movements. Icons such as Gaura Devi, a leader of the Chipko movement, and Tinchari Mai (Deepa Nautiyal), a prominent figure in the Anti-Liquor movement, exemplify this legacy. These trailblazing women have boldly stood against injustice, embodying the indomitable spirit of Uttarakhand.
- Guardians of Forest Resources- Women in Uttarakhand have traditionally served as steadfast protectors of their natural resources. As primary beneficiaries of forest products, they possess a deep understanding of maintaining ecological balance. Over the years, they have led initiatives against deforestation, over-mining, and environmental degradation, often putting their lives on the line to safeguard the environment.
- Grassroots Activism- In villages and towns, women led marches, staged hunger strikes, and organized sit-ins. They defied patriarchal norms by

stepping into leadership roles, challenging stereotypes, and amplifying women's voices in shaping the future of the state.

Building on the feminist theoretical perspectives outlined in the previous chapter, this section turns to the songs themselves, which serve as concrete examples of the concepts discussed. Garhwali women's folk songs—ranging from laments and work songs to ritual jagar chants and migration ballads—encapsulate the lived realities, resistance, and subversive expression of women in the region. By presenting the original Garhwali lyrics alongside English translations, this section illuminates how women encode critiques of patriarchy, social injustice, and ecological challenges within oral performance. Each song demonstrates the interplay of voice, agency, and collective memory, showing how private experiences are transformed into shared cultural narratives and acts of subtle protest.

This section presents the original Garhwali lyrics alongside English translations to make the

cultural and emotional nuances accessible to a wider audience. Each translation is accompanied by a detailed analysis that situates the song within the frameworks of voice, subversion, hidden transcripts, and counter-narratives as discussed through the works of bell hooks, Spivak, Sangari, Scott, and Butler. Through this approach, the songs are not only interpreted as aesthetic texts but are also understood as cultural instruments of resistance, reflecting women's negotiation of social norms, patriarchal authority, and ecological challenges.

By systematically linking lyrics, translation, and feminist analysis, this section demonstrates how Garhwali women transform private experiences of grief, labor, and longing into collective acts of expression and subtle protest. In doing so, the songs emerge as both historical documentation and living archives of women's resilience and agency.

The analysis of songs expressing dissent, protest, and social change concerning women's lives:

संसार का लोगू संसार मा क्या ।	Oh, people of this world - what is in this world?
संसार का सूर्य-शराब ना प्या ।।।	Oh, people of this world do not drink alcohol
संत्सग का बीच मा खराब ना हया।	Don't ruin yourself in the company of falsehood amidst the circle of truth.
संसार का लोगू संसार मा क्या।	Oh, people of this world - what is in this world?
झोपड़ी बीकीगी शराब ना प्या।	Do not drink alcohol! Your house will be sold
डोखरी बीकीगी शराब ना प्या	Your fields will be sold- do not drink
धकुली बीबीगी शराब ना प्या	Your thali will be sold- do not drink
संसार का लोगू संसार मा क्या।	Oh, people of this world - what is in this world

The song presents a stark warning about the consequences of alcohol consumption, emphasizing how it leads to the destruction of one's life, possessions, and relationships. Don't ruin yourself in the company of falsehood amidst the circle of truth." This line carries a deeper philosophical message. The "company of falsehood" refers to the corrupt influences and vices one may associate with, while the "circle of truth" symbolizes the righteous path or community. The song is advising that indulging in vices like alcohol will lead one away from truth

and virtue, ultimately causing personal and societal ruin.

In many traditional societies, family, home, and land are seen as fundamental to one's identity and well-being. The song uses these symbols—house, fields, and thali—to illustrate how alcohol can lead to the destruction of these essential pillars. The lyrics serve as a powerful reminder that substance abuse can destroy not just individual health but also the foundations of one's family and society.

Additionally, the line "company of falsehood amidst the circle of truth" suggests a moral

aspect, urging individuals to avoid dishonest influences that lead them down the wrong path. It warns of the danger of succumbing to peer pressure or the allure of bad company, highlighting how it can pull someone away from the truth and righteousness.

In Garhwali and many other cultures, there are deep connections between family, land, and community. These are often seen as irreplaceable aspects of life. The song draws attention to how alcohol consumption can undermine these

Song 2

उकाली कू बाटू, हि रदी ठमा ठम । खूट्यो कि पौजी, बजदी छमा-छम बिमला घस्यारी छ बारवी पास । आंगली कटी गी नी कटेई घास ॥ होंदू सबेर नकूल खां दीन । गों की घस्यारी घास कू जाँ दीन ॥ बिसुणी म बात बैठीक लाँदीन । सयाणी घस्यारी कू बोल्युं मांदनी प्यारी बिमला छ नयी घस्यारी । देखिक बण भूलिगे होस्यारी ॥	On the uphill path, footsteps go 'thama-tham'; The anklets of the village girls jingle 'chhama-chham' Vimla, the grass-cutter, has passed Class Twelve The blade slips; her finger bears the mark of her inexperience At dawn, the women of the village head out to cut grass, Amid the idle chatter, she sat to join the talk, She agreed with whatever the wise grass-cutters says Among them Vimla, a new ghasiyari She climbs cautiously along the steep forest path
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The song celebrates the life and experiences of rural women, particularly those involved in the traditional practice of grass-cutting, while weaving themes of growth, resilience, and empowerment. "At dawn, the women of the village head out to cut grass, Among them is Vimla, a new ghasiyari, eager yet untried." The collective effort of women heading out at dawn signifies a shared responsibility and mutual support within rural life. The focus on Vimla introduces her as a symbol of youth and inexperience. Her characterization as "eager yet untried" reflects her enthusiasm but also hints at her journey of learning and transformation.

The song captures the beauty, struggles, and communal spirit of rural traditions like grass-cutting, which hold cultural significance. Vimla's character embodies the spirit of self-improvement and empowerment, inspiring other women to embrace both tradition and progress.

The interplay between the experienced grass-cutter and Vimla emphasizes the importance of

connections and disrupt the very fabric of one's existence. It acts as both a personal and societal warning, urging people to reconsider their choices for a more prosperous and harmonious life.

This reflection on the transient nature of material wealth and the importance of personal integrity is rooted in the values of traditional communities, where maintaining one's moral compass is seen as essential to survival and prosperity.

guidance and collective wisdom. By highlighting Vimla's education and her role in spreading literacy, the song acknowledges the merging of modern values with traditional practices in rural settings. The song beautifully narrates Vimla's journey from inexperience to mastery, illustrating her transformation into a confident, skilled, and empowered individual. It intertwines themes of mentorship, resilience, and the power of education, making it a touching tribute to the strength and determination of rural women.

Environmental Issues

Forests are among the most vital natural resources for villages in Uttarakhand. They form a significant ecosystem and play a key role in promoting economic development and maintaining ecological balance. Beyond their protective roles, forests serve as natural biosphere reserves. They provide essential resources such as fuel, fodder, food, and timber,

while also contributing to ecological stability. Women rely heavily on forests and the surrounding resources for their livelihoods. In the villages of Maram and Nanoli, women play a central role in collecting fuelwood, fodder, wild foods, and cultivating subsistence crops for survival. Traditionally, they have been deeply involved in integrating forest resources with food production and animal husbandry. (bina Aggarwal 1981).

The folk songs widely sung by the women during work in the villages clearly demonstrate the women's closeness, caringness and love for the trees and the forests. The folk songs, therefore,

Song 3

पेड़ों का तुम सुन लो क्रंदन, कर दो उनका रक्षाबंधन।	Listen to the cries of trees, Protect them by tying rakhis to them.
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So, the women tied rakhis to the trees, as if they were their brothers. Even men followed suit, overriding the inherent gender connotation. Women and men took collective onus for the protection of the trees. The slogan made an emotional appeal and invoked tradition to involve people in organizing protests. The folk invocation

also help in understanding, at least, how these women construct the social reality. These village women relate to the surrounding forest as a bundle of significations. For them, the forest is an important source of livelihood and economic space.

The Chipko Movement has played a big role in the eco-feminist discourse. The women of the hills have a special bond with the environment and the movement became an important tool for them to protect their forests. An ecological protest movement that emerged from the Garhwal region, the slogan of the movement is known as, 'Rakhi Bandhan Movement'.

hopes that the day is not far when the Himalaya shall awaken in its full glory and the killer axe shall cease to exist:

Aaj Himalaya jaagega

Kroor kulhara bhagega

Song 4

ना काटा तौं डाळ्यूं डाळ्यूं न काटा दिदौं, डाळ्यूं न काटा डाळ्यूं न काटा भुल्यूं, डाळ्यूं न काटा ना काटा...॥ डाळि कटेलि त माटि बगाली न कूड़ि न पुंगड़ि न डोखरी बचाली घास लखड़ा न खेति हि राली भोळ तेरि आस औलाद क्य खाली ना काटा...॥	Don't cut the branches, Don't cut, don't let them be cut, Don't forget to not cut, don't let them be cut. If the branch is cut, the soil will slip away Neither the grain store, nor the fodder stack, nor the barn will be saved The grass, the timber, even the farmland will be gone. Tomorrow, your children will be left with nothing; Do not cut
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This song tells the importance of preserving nature, particularly trees. The "branches" symbolize trees or any natural resource. The repeated plea to not cut the branches reflects a deep concern for the consequences of deforestation or environmental degradation. The song portrays the interconnectedness of life, suggesting that if nature (symbolized by the branches) is harmed, it will lead to severe

consequences, such as the loss of homes, food scarcity, and the inability to sustain life.

The final lines point out that if the branches (trees) are cut, fields will be overtaken by grass (indicating an imbalance in agriculture), and hunger will affect everyone, including children, emphasizing the importance of ecological balance for the well-being of future generations. Overall, this song serves as a poignant reminder

of the critical role that nature plays in sustaining life and the need to protect it.

The Chipko Movement

The Chipko Movement highlights the deep connection between the people of Uttarakhand and their beliefs in spirits and deities. In Garhwal, the folklore tradition of Jagar involves a spirit possession ceremony where a deity is invoked through a chosen medium, accompanied by ritual drumming and the singing of religious narratives known as gathas. This is followed by a ritual known as Jagariya.

Women in Uttarakhand play a significant role in the hill economy, managing livelihoods, livestock, and agriculture. In 1973, the Dasholi Song 5

बृक्षाण का तुम सुन लो क्रंदन, बनाओ यन रक्षाबंधन।	Listen to the cries of trees. Protect them by tying rakhis to them
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Song 6

तू मदिरा पियू दिन रात, घर की हालत कर दी खाक, बच्चा भूख से रोवा, तू खेला जुआ।	You drink liquor day and night, You've turned the house into ashes, The children cry from hunger, While you gamble away.
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This song is a blunt, unambiguous indictment of alcoholism and its devastating impact on rural households. The first line, “तू मदिरा पियू दिन रात” (You drink liquor day and night), sets the tone of accusation from the outset. There is no metaphor or veiled reference — the protest is direct, signalling the urgency of the problem and the frustration of the speaker.

The second line, “घर की हालत कर दी खाक” (You've turned the house into ashes), uses a striking image. “Ashes” in Garhwali idiom implies total ruin — both material and emotional. This suggests that alcoholism is not merely an individual vice but a destructive force that consumes the entire household's wellbeing, security, and dignity.

Song 7

Song on Migration Lyrics (Garhwali): पैरा धसि धसि गौड़ू पथ्यू, भैजी गयां परदेश,	On the steep, crumbling paths, My brother has gone to the plains, At home his wife weeps, And the daughters cry too.
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Gram Swarajya Mandal, a cooperative of artisans in Chamoli led by Chandi Prasad Bhatt, sought permission to fell two ash trees but were denied. However, a commercial firm was granted permission to harvest the same trees. This disparity gave rise to the Chipko Movement, which became a powerful eco-feminist initiative.

The women of the region, deeply connected to their environment, used the movement to protect their forests. Originating in the Garhwal region, the Chipko Movement became an ecological protest symbolized by its well-known slogan, the ‘Rakhi Bandhan Movement’. It remains a pivotal chapter in the history of environmental conservation and women's empowerment.

In “बच्चा भूख से रोवा” (The children cry from hunger), the protest expands from marital grievance to maternal anguish. Hunger is one of the most powerful forms of social injustice, and here it is framed not as the result of drought, poverty, or misfortune, but as the direct outcome of the husband's choices.

The final line, “तू खेला जुआ” (While you gamble away), reveals a double vice: alcohol abuse coupled with gambling. Together, they paint a picture of habitual irresponsibility and reckless disregard for the family's survival. In a subsistence-based rural economy, where every rupee and every grain matters, such behaviour amounts to betrayal of familial duty.

घरमा रौणु छैणु बौज्यू, कन्या रौणु छैणु ब्वैस। कुंठा खाली पड़ीं, धानु सूखि गयां खेत, कांधि घसणी ल्यांदीं चैणु, अलसि रौणु छैणु रैत। ब्वैणु गाडूं मा पाणी भरदी, बौज्यू लकड़ि काटी, भैजी कें पत्रि न आयी, आँखि भरि-भरि राटी। घास-काटणि में डूबि गेनीं, पसीना भिगोली अंग, भैजी परदेश कमावन, ब्वैणु भूखि रही संगी।	The grain storage lies empty, The paddy has dried in the fields, The women carry bundles of grass, And at night they weep in despair. The sister fetches water from the stream, The sister-in-law gathers firewood, But no letter has come from my brother, And their eyes are swollen with tears. Lost in endless grass-cutting, Their bodies soaked in sweat, While my brother labors in the plains, His sisters remain hungry at home.
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Migration, particularly male outmigration, is one of the most dominant realities of Garhwal. Men traditionally leave their homes to work in the plains, cities, or army, while women, children, and the elderly are left behind in the villages. This song belongs to that genre of folk expression where women's suffering, loneliness, and heavy workload are voiced in simple yet powerful words. "पैरा धसि धसि गौडूं पथ्यू" (On the steep, crumbling paths)

→ The song begins with the imagery of treacherous mountain paths, symbolizing the difficult life terrain of the villagers. It sets the tone of hardship. "भैजी गयां परदेश" (My brother has gone to the plains)

→ "परदेश" (pardesh) symbolizes separation, absence, and the alien world of cities where men go to earn. Empty granaries & dried paddy fields

→ "कुंठा खाली पड़ीं, धानु सूखि गयां खेत" represents economic decline, food insecurity, and the inability of women alone to sustain agriculture in the absence of men. Women's endless labor

→ Carrying grass, fetching water, cutting wood, and yet crying at night highlights the double burden of physical labor and emotional suffering. Absence of communication

→ "भैजी कें पत्रि न आयी" (No letter has come from my brother) shows not only physical absence but also the deep emotional gap created by migration. Swollen eyes, sweat-soaked bodies
→ These are bodily metaphors of grief and toil.

Tears and sweat blend as markers of feminine endurance.

The song powerfully reflects gendered consequences of migration:

- Women take on men's agricultural duties (ploughing fields, collecting firewood, cutting grass).
- They also manage domestic duties (fetching water, caring for children).
- Despite this labor, their contribution is unrecognized, and they suffer emotionally in the absence of husbands and brothers.

This migration song is not just personal grief—it is a collective cultural testimony of Garhwal. It records the voices of women who shoulder the burden of absence, grief, and survival. It becomes: a document of rural life, a critique of socio-economic realities, a feminist expression of women's hidden suffering.

The Garhwali folk songs analyzed above reveal a rich interplay of voice, resistance, and social commentary, illustrating how women transform everyday experiences into acts of cultural and political significance. Across themes of alcoholism, migration, environmental conservation, and rural labor, these songs encode dissent against social injustices and patriarchal structures, offering both critique and guidance. Women's voices, whether expressed through laments, work songs, or ritual chants,

emerge as powerful instruments of resistance, reflecting hooks' concept of "talking back" and Spivak's notion of the subaltern speaking through oral traditions. The songs also exemplify Scott's hidden transcripts, embedding social critique in culturally sanctioned performances, and Butler's theory of subversive repetition, where repeated enactment of these songs reinforces resilience while subtly challenging gendered norms.

CONCLUSION

The folk songs of Garhwali women are more than aesthetic expressions; they are living archives of resistance, resilience, and collective memory. Through laments, work songs, ritual chants, and migration ballads, women voice personal and communal struggles, critique patriarchal structures, and assert agency within constrained social spaces. These songs transform silence into speech, grief into solidarity, and labor into cultural testimony, revealing how ordinary acts of singing can enact subtle social change. Viewed through feminist frameworks, they exemplify hidden transcripts, subversive repetition, and the power of the subaltern to speak, demonstrating that women's oral traditions are vital instruments of cultural critique, empowerment, and social transformation in the Garhwal Himalayas.

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